

## **The Best of Mary Todd Lincoln, the Sixteenth First Lady**

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Raised in a slave-owning and wealthy family, Mary Todd Lincoln, the daughter of Senator Robert and Eliza Todd, grew up in a fourteen-room house in Lexington, Kentucky, now known as The Mary Todd Lincoln House. It is still standing today. Mary's family owned slaves, using them as servants in their home and helping care for the children. It might be unbelievable to some, but Mary later helped her husband end slavery, and even formed a bond of friendship with a former slave, Elizabeth "Lizzy" Keckly. Elizabeth often thought that others judged Mary too harshly, and after Lincoln was elected president, Elizabeth not only became Mary's tailor but one of her best friends.

At the young age of six, Mary experienced the pain of losing her mother. Soon after, Mary's father remarried Elizabeth "Betsy" Humphrey and together had eight additional children, making their family a total of seventeen family members. Mary struggled daily to get along with her stepmother and at the same time she yearned for attention.

Mary's father insisted she obtain an education at a time when few women had been offered the opportunity. From 1826-1832 Mary attended Shelby Female Academy, later known as Dr. Ward's Academy where she studied grammar, geography, arithmetic, poetry, and literature. She later transferred to Madame Mentelle's Boarding School where she learned to speak and write French, and began dancing, singing, and performing

in plays. In 1837 Mary decided return to Dr. Ward's Academy to advance her studies. Being ambitious and intelligent, Mary was never one to sit back and worked to excel.

Mary Todd escaped her home at age twenty and made the decision to move to Springfield, Illinois, with her older sister, Elizabeth. In Springfield, Mary was unexpectedly attracted to Abraham Lincoln, a self-schooled son of a poor white farmer. After three years of a off-and-on-relationship and without the approval of her family, Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd finally married on November 4, 1842. A year later, Mary gave birth to her first son, Robert Todd Lincoln. Thomas, William and Edward were born soon after.

As Lincoln pursued in his career of becoming a Springfield lawyer, Mary stayed home taking care of their growing family. The years in Springfield were unlike anything she had ever known; they brought hard work to a woman who struggled with her responsibilities. Although she was committed to her marriage, Mary was lonely and ached for someone to who she could talk. When her husband came home in the evening he would sit, finish the work he brought home, and would rarely communicate with Mary. Then, in 1847 Lincoln was elected to a single term in Congress. This gave Mary and the boys a winter in Washington until Lincoln sent them home to Illinois because he became too occupied with his duties.

Abraham was constantly away campaigning for political office, practicing law, and in 1861 Lincoln, finally fulfilled his dreams of becoming president. Although Mary loved her husband deeply and supported his career, she wished they would be closer. On February 1, 1850, Mary and Abraham faced the devastation of losing their son, Edward, and three years later on February 20, 1863, they experienced another loss, their son

William, probably due to typhoid fever. Mary was so devastated that she stayed in her room for weeks and did not even attend Willie's funeral. However, Lincoln expressed his feelings a different way. Mary became very depressed. Many thought she began showing signs of mental distress, most likely due to the death of her boys. He would not show any emotion in public, but instead Mary would hear him weeping quietly in his room.

In 1865 Lincoln was elected to another term as president. Then on April 14, 1865, Abraham and Mary visited Ford's Theater to watch a presentation of "Our American Cousin." It was meant to be a relaxing evening for the president and first lady who were exhausted from the war that had finally come to an end, but they were unaware what lay ahead. Lincoln was assassinated and died the next day.

Feeling the devastation of losing her sons, Edward and William, and her husband, Mary became worried she was financially ruined and her behavior caused her to sell off many of her possessions, even though she had the proceeds from Lincoln's estate and a generous retirement fund from the federal government. Consequently, Mary moved to Chicago and spent some time touring Europe but nothing seemed to help. Then the unthinkable happened. Her son, Thomas Lincoln, died at the age of 18 and in 1875 her only surviving son to reach adulthood, Robert, who became very worried about his mother, declared her mentally incompetent since he feared she was not able to take care of her affairs and could possibly commit suicide.

She spent the last months of her life with her older sister, Elizabeth, and died in Springfield, Illinois, on July 16, 1882. Mary was still wearing her wedding ring when she died and was buried next to husband in Springfield's Oak Ridge Cemetery. During

her lifetime, Mary Todd Lincoln mourned those she loved so dearly. Faced with many obstacles in her life, she often felt shamed, abandoned, and isolated. [From Jennifer Fleischner, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckly*; Lyndee Henderson, *Remarkable Illinois Women*; Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln Mailbag*; Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*; Henry Moon, "Mrs. Lincoln, Wife of the President," *Harper's Weekly*, November 8, 1862; Helen Nicolay, *Lincoln's Secretary*; Ruth Randall, *Mary Lincoln Biography of a Marriage*; Carl Sandburg, *The Prairie Years and the War Years- Abraham Lincoln*; Brian Thornton, *101 Things You Didn't Know About Lincoln*; The White House, "Mary Todd Lincoln" <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/firstladies/ml16.html>> (Oct. 11, 2008); and H. Donald Winkler, *Lincoln's Ladies*.]